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Systems of Political Control and Bureaucracy in Human Societies

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A TARASCAN CACICAZGO
Structure and Function

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66 CACIQUISMO is a type of informal Hispano-American government operating to enforce the partially arbitrary control of an association of individuals under one leader, the cacique, a term derived through Spanish from the Arawak (Alegria, 1952). Caciquismo is a largely unstudied and partially covert feature of Mexican culture. It has long been dubbed a "national social problem."

A cacicazgo is a concrete case of caciquismo. Our primary reference is to the cacicazgo in a village, here called Durazno, which is part of Tarascan society, a group of some seventy thousand Indians living in the cool green mountains of northwestern Michoacan, Mexico. Salient traits of Durazno culture are: a population of fourteen hundred, bilingualism, plow and hoe agriculture, corn as a cash crop, adobe housing, a corn-beans-chili diet, a total absence of handicrafts, and a leading role in the radical, anti-clerical politics of the state. The ejido land, won in 1924, is administered by the community and worked in plots by families of socially equal peasants. The generalizations that follow are based on a detailed description and analysis of the culture for the following historical periods: first, the indigenous culture of 1885; second, a troubled time following the desiccation by Spanish capitalists of an adjacent, life-giving, marshy lake (1900-21), coupled with the rising control of a regional landlord-mestizo-clerical faction; third, a period covering the struggle for the rich, black soil of the ejido (1921-26), with the crystallization of an agrarian cacicazgo; fourth, a period of twenty-two years of sanguinary contention between changing factions (1926-48); finally, a period of increasingly centralized control under the present-day cacique and his oligarchy. The methods and concepts of ethnology, political science, and sociology were severally employed. The political culture of Durazno was set within the total context of village life and the larger structures of area, state, and nation (Friedrich, 1957).[1]

The principal structural units of Durazno culture have definite and often discrete political functions. The primary relations between men within the nuclear family enjoin active political loyalty that has practically never been broken. (The one known case in over fifty years in which brothers sided opposite factions is easily understandable on psychological grounds.) The father-son-brother block is the minimal and the most cohesive political unit of which larger structures are composed; intrigues must be conducted in terms of these blocks because every political act automatically involves all the primary relatives of both the nuclear families of the individual concerned (Levi-Strauss, 1945). The father in Durazno culture leads the nuclear political block. The inner core of a cacicazgo always includes the primary relatives of the cacique. The cacique leads this inner core and plays the role of an actual or would-be patriarch over the entire village. Older, charismatic caciques are called "tata," or "father," by the Tarascans. Thus the nuclear family has political functions in the village at large, and these functions are especially important in defining the cacicazgo.

A second structural block in Durazno politics is the ejidal family, a group of one or

612 more nuclear or bilaterally expanded families enjoying the usufruct of an ejidal plot,
423 five acres of black soil. Such families are corporate, "nonunilineal" descent groups,
66 with a locus of authority, which trace descent bilaterally from a common older relative who first acquired the plot (Goodenough, 1955). Almost all of the 218 ejidal plots are controlled by such families. They act as a block in politics and are represented by one head who votes at ejidal meetings.[2] The representatives of such ejidal families also dominate in the civil government since they include more than half the politically active nuclear families and, as a group, also possess the overwhelming mass of the community's wealth in private land. Occasionally a majority at an ejidal meeting will oppose the cacical authority.

592 The household, the third bilateral structure, includes one or more nuclear or bilat-
66 erally expanded families living in one or more adobe houses around one backyard. The majority of households contain ejidal families. The male members of a household, welded together by shared domestic and agricultural experiences, support each other during the ongoing political schisms and realignments; the members of a household operate as a block, which, unlike the nuclear family, can be divided by situational determinants.

612 The bilateral kindred also has a political function. Certain members of an individual's
66 bilateral kindred, especially ambilateral uncles and nephews, and first cousins, are selected through the interaction of certain variables, such as ward residence. They function, among other things, as a politically supporting nucleus around every individual. The first agrarian cacique, for example, was principally supported by six first and second cousins, and the principal bastions of the present-day cacique are five (six till 1954) second- and third-degree nephews. In critical political situations this kindred stands firm.

621 A final type of bilateral structure divides the community into five large and several
612 minor political "families," each with a core of ten to thirty men sharing a patronymic,
66 plus a much larger associated group related to the core through blood and marriage, or simply affiliated through choice. Though the principles of alignment to these groups are numerous and flexible, all politically active men at any time belong to just one "family," and politics is conceived of by the villagers as struggles between such "families." They are the maximal political blocks within the village. A major event in Durazno political history was the exodus in 1935 of over thirty nuclear families belonging to one huge political "family." Informal political organization in the community is thus largely a special function of various bilateral kinship structures. These structures also partially define the structure of the cacicazgo itself. The cacique and his principal followers are each the focus of overlapping nuclear and ejidal families and bilateral kindreds, and they all belong to one of the large political "families."

608 Two other primary relations possess important political functions: ceremonial kinship
66 and friendship. Ceremonial kinship is the compadre relationship between parents and godparents, formed on the occasion of baptism. The tie is stronger than that obtaining between first cousins and analogous to that of siblings. The compadre bond surrounds every adult male with four to seven trusted and loyal age mates with whom he has grown up and who are usually his social equals in this "horizontal system" (Mintz and Wolf, 1950). A political leader planning an assassination must reckon with the automatic if not immediate retaliation by some of his victim's compadres. Since good "fighters" tend to be related as compadres, a homicidal act against one of them may unleash a swift counterattack. In 1939 two gunmen who unsuccessfully ambushed a leader of the ruling faction were hunted down and shot to death within three hours by the friends and compadres of their victim. Individuals tend to vote and to ally themselves politically

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with their compadres. On the other hand, intense political factionalism may lead directly to a rupture of these "quasi-sibling" bonds; one case of politically motivated homicide 66
between compadres is actually on record (1944).

The compadre tie also has the special function of relating the kinship nucleus of the cacicazgo outward to other leaders, and of relating some of the leaders to each other and to apolitical members of the village. The strength of a cacical system depends in part on the size of its ceremonial kinship ties, as it does on the size of the bilateral [631]
structures previously mentioned. Ceremonial kinship, like friendship, also links a few leaders, especially the cacique, sideward and upward to politicians in other villages and in higher informal structures. The institution of ceremonial kinship provides a unique form of intra- and extracommunal integration for this Tarascan cacicazgo.

The last primary relation, that of intimate friendship, is an informal bond of mutual 572
confidence and support, an "informal design" (Kluckhohn, 1945, p. 98), relating the average Indian to about six other men. Friendship is highly selective and jealousy-ridden. 66
It is more flexible than the compadre bond or the nuclear family ties, but like them has important and partially unique political functions. Friendship, first of all, creates another set of political blocks of which each man is a unique focus. Second, friendship surrounds the cacical nucleus with a network of individuals who at any given time may occupy most of the formal offices, while the cacique and his relatives remain in the background. Two of the present cacique's nephews, for example, have never held any formal local office. Friendship also functions to relate major and minor leaders to each other. Sociometric analysis has revealed that almost all the "intimate friends" of the leaders are themselves leaders, forming a group that is directed inward toward itself in this respect.

Friendship is especially important in the Durazno cacicazgo because of the tendency 622
of leaders in such an authoritarian system to become isolated through the traditional and automatic hostility felt toward a person in their status. Such leaders, feeling a need 572
for support, may acquire up to eight or nine close friends. On the other hand, the powerful present-day cacique is a sociometric isolate within the village; most of his friends and compadres live in other parts of the state. This indicates the undemocratic character of his control. All caciques have a number of loyal followers who are neither friends nor relatives but who remain fairly true because of self-interest, fear, or other types of highly personal and deeply ingrained traits.

The quasi-sibling structures of ceremonial kinship and friendship combine with those 571
of natural siblings to form for every individual a horizontal tier the sections of which have definite and partially distinctive political functions. The three horizontal blocks of 66
this tier, while largely discrete for any individual--the "compadrazgo of intensification" being very rare (Paul, 1942)--overlap and intersect as we move from individual to individual. They produce a complicated network of political relations. Numerous oblique sibling and quasi-sibling ties, and the godparent-godchild tie, combine to form a continuum of relations through the generations. Every adult individual is likewise the focus of two interlocking nuclear families and of the three bilateral structures described above--the ejidal family, the household, and the bilateral kindred. These nuclear bilateral and horizontal structures intermesh with one another and with those of other individuals to form the political reticulum of Durazno.

Thus the informal morphology of the Durazno cacicazgo is a special concatenation of structural units found in all parts of the village culture. These structures have general political functions, such as the absolute loyalty of siblings, and also political functions particular to the cacicazgo, such as the way "intimate friendship" relates leaders to each other. The informal structure of the Durazno cacicazgo can thus be described

largely in terms of the normal and special political functions of kinship, ceremonial kinship, and friendship. But the cacical association is more than the concatenation of these social structures; it is a distinct political entity with its own patterns of action and its unique goal of power over the community.

Let us now turn to these distinctive workings of the cacicazgo. Political sovereignty is exercised primarily by the cacique and his inner core of relatives and friends--eight men in all. They are more or less supported by some twenty lesser leaders. Political matters are informally discussed at length by the leaders and some of the citizens at large. Important policy decisions are made at special meetings, sometimes secretly convened, after a partial decision has been previously reached. Important legal cases are likewise resolved before the court opens by the inner core leaders, especially by the oldest nephew of the cacique. Political decisions at the special meetings are generally by majority vote, but often a majority of the inner eight is enough, and in extreme cases the cacique imposes his will alone. The matters dealt with in special meetings and conversations between the inner leaders are primarily the following: all land distribution questions, public works (especially irrigation problems), the making up of the ballots for formal office, and reprisals against enemies and the quashing of nascent interest groups. Effective government is informal, and a description solely in terms of formal political institutions would miss the main point of Durazno politics.

The informal structure of one cacical group in Durazno has always been paralleled by that of a contending or fallen party with its would-be cacique, secret meetings, and the same patterns of organization. At some times, as during 1927, the two parties have been equal in strength. At other times, as in 1956, the fallen party has contained only an aging leader with a pathetic kinship nucleus and some twenty followers. Durazno, like villages all over Michoacan, has a normal pattern of two or more contending factions, each related independently and informally to other villages and higher structures.

The ethnic factor is often important here. During the agrarian period (1921-26), Durazno and the two other agrarian Indian villages of the valley fought together against the mestizo hirelings and Spanish landlords. A major turning point in Durazno political and cultural history came when opposing Indian factions within the village began using mestizo neighbors against their own "blood." The village agrarian caciques have themselves always been culturally marginal, participants in both Tarascan and mestizo culture. They feel a high ambivalence in both directions: partial rejection of their Indian followers, resentment toward mestizos, and different kinds of identification with both groups.

The village leaders, as political "middlemen" (Wolf, 1956), relate the political demands and supplies of their constituents to the partially complementary demands and supplies of the higher echelons, of the Cardenas machine in the case of Michoacan. In the case of two strong contending factions, both are separately related to two contesting state-wide structures, as during the "serratista" period from 1932 to 1934. The indigenous, factional structure of the village, with its qualities of an ongoing clan vendetta, is sensitively and immediately connected to national "theoretical" questions such as the "decollectivization of the ejidal patrimony" (1925). The national problems translate downward into specific blood-and-soil-issues.[3] The political relation between national structures and nerve-center villages like Durazno is constant and often direct; the Indian cacique goes straight to Mexico City to confer with the national party chairman.

The formal government in Durazno is divided between the civil and ejidal arms. The three civil officers enjoy slightly more prestige and pervasive power in the community organization and the arbitration of legal cases, while the four ejidal posts are the more

coveted because of the higher financial rewards. The nominal pay in both cases is supplemented by bribes and "cuts" from taxes, and by the ego satisfactions of exercising power. Elections take place by public vote every one and three years, respectively, following the informal composition of ballots and considerable discussion at open meetings. High public attendance at these meetings is due both to genuine interest and to fear of persecution if the cacical group should suspect boycotting. Although the duties are formally allotted to specific officers, such as a judge, the officers of both governmental arms actually operate as a group, rather flexibly playing the several roles. In 1956, for example, the civil secretary also functioned at times as judge and mayor.

Both the formal arms of government are controlled by the informal cacicazgo. Today, the preplanned ballot is always finally accepted at the public meetings. Under conditions of centralized autocracy, at least one officer in both the civil and ejidal arms is an inner core leader, and when political troubles are anticipated two offices in each branch may be filled by such nuclear individuals. In the heated election year of 1956, for example, the civil secretary, the ejidal president, and the president of the ejidal watch were nephews of the cacique; the cacique himself was ejidal treasurer, and an old "fighter" and friend of the cacique was judge.

Cacical systems, however, swing between the two extremes of autocratic centralization and contentious fission. When the historical process of contentious fission between the energetic "ex-have-nots" of agrarian politics reaches its extreme, both factions may offer ballots for both branches of government. They will be hotly contended in a variety of ways. The result may be that both factions are represented, as in 1927, or that one faction controls the ejido and another the civil government, as in 1945. Such formal reflexes of a breakdown of informal hegemony are invariably accompanied by a so-called "bad time," with attempts on the lives of the caciques of both factions. Cacical patterns thus rend communities and at other times provide a highly political integration, both in the name of a social and material progress that may actually take shape in the form of schools and public works. The extremes of contentious fission and autocratic centralization do not seem to be correlated with the degree of formal collectivization of the ejido, although such institutional collectivization does make it easier to exercise dictatorial powers and to extract larger financial cuts. On the other hand, the importance of centralized control for continued drainage of the ejido legitimizes the term "hydraulic caciques" (Wittfogel, 1957).

Both formal governments of Durazno are independently related upward to higher, formal structures. Durazno leaders have occupied numerous formal positions at higher levels owing to the salient informal role of the tiny pueblo in the intrigue, violence, and heartfelt radicalism of Michoacan politics. Politics and the cultivation of political leaders have in fact become a sort of communal specialty in Durazno. Durazno caciques founded and held numerous offices in the state-wide peasant League of Agrarian Communities; they have been municipal presidents three times, state congressmen three times, and, once, substitute to a national congressman. They have always formally controlled the important "Regional Committee," the regional organ of the National Peasant Confederation. While highly atypical with respect to this prominence, Durazno does exemplify the role that tough, sophisticated, and land-controlling Indian caciques can play in regional and state politics. As the people say, "Some towns specialize in hatmaking, others in pottery. Durazno specializes in politics."

Primarily four political methods have been used by the caciques and their followers for the past forty years. The first, verbal persuasion, takes place in small informal groups and at the frequent political meetings; by comparison with other villages Durazno is a beehive of political discussions. Verbal persuasion figured especially during the

208 stormy agrarian period (1921-26), when the agrarian hero was, by word of mouth, "touch-
66 ing the sensitive parts" of the Tarascan peasantry.

The second method, astute intrigue, follows fairly familiar Machiavellian lines but
661 with a self-conscious sophistication and articulateness that would have delighted the immortal Florentine (Machiavelli, 1942). Intrigue has always been a major, time-consuming political activity in Durazno, and astuteness (astucia) is a personal quality much admired by the cunning leaders. It is true that politics is often infused by the characteristic desperation of peasants struggling for land with a newly activated lust for power; old agrarian fighters recall that after the land reform in 1924 they felt like the "recently arrived." But Durazno politics also has the character for its participants of a fascinating game to be played astutely, in accordance with certain rules and a high sense of art.

667 The third principal method, human organization, received great impetus during the twenties through the formation of regional committees and of "shock brigades," organized on Leninist principles. Leaders today conceive of their role as one of "organizing" and "controlling" the pueblo and the region. The cacique maintains a high threshhold of internal discipline, but the relations between the other leaders are horizontal, loose, and shifting. The importance of relations with higher organizations has already been described.

579 The fourth method, the "diagnostic trait" of violence, assumed the stature of a civil
664 war during the agrarian period when indigenous patterns of blood vengeance and friendship loyalty combined with the ideological justifications of the reform struggle. During the twenty-year factional period from 1926 to 1948, Durazno and the region attained a unique notoriety in the state. Twenty-three cross-checked politically motivated homicides and several times more woundings and armed encounters took place in the three "bad years" from 1937 to 1939 alone. Leaders and ordinary citizens recognise violence as a normal aspect of politics, but today many are sick of it, and the incidence has greatly dropped. Assassinations are usually carried out by the more "valiant" members of a party and are generally directed against the minor figures of opposing parties. The number of active or potential peasant "fighters" in Durazno has always ranged between ten and forty and has been a significant power factor in region and state. The power basis of politics is a comparatively obvious factor here.

171 Much of what we have said here would apply to other forms of caciquismo, including larger, non-Indian, conservative areas, such as Spain. In the Boasian spirit, however, we have limited our inductions to one Mexican Indian cacicazgo. In 1896 Franz Boas wrote: "When we have cleared up the history of a single culture . . . we can then investigate in how far the same causes were at work in the development of other cultures."

NOTES

114 1. Fourteen months of fieldwork were conducted between March, 1955, and July, 1956, under the auspices of the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Mexican government.

2. Nonparticipants have illegally rented their plots, or are boycotting the cacique, or have withdrawn from politics from fear or weariness.

3. Leaders of opposition factions in the village stand ready to switch and offer a revolutionising support to a leader who challenges a state or national machine. This automatic village-level support of an opposition leader partially explains the cataclysmic success of Lazaro Cardenas when, in 1934, he turned against national "strong man" Calles.

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